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Marchenko, Anatoly
Doc. U. 012 My Testimony

A BOOK FOR TODAY

Soviet Prison Life Detailed

By REED J. IRVINE

MY TESTIMONY. By ANATOLY MARCHENKO. E. P. Dutton & Co. 415 pp. \$8.95

Anatoly Marchenko is one of that small but growing band within the U.S.S.R. who are willing to sacrifice their lives for liberty. Marchenko at first wanted liberty only for himself. He started out as a worker in Siberia, with only an eighth-grade education. Dissatisfied with life in the Soviet Union, he endeavored to cross the border into Iran in 1960. He was caught and sentenced to six-years imprisonment for high treason. He considered himself lucky. He could have been shot.

However, for many death would have been preferable to the "life" that lay ahead of young Marchenko in the prisons of the Soviet Union. We now know a great deal about the Soviet penal system in Stalin's time. Books such as Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch" and "The First Circle" have graphically portrayed the incredible inhumanity of the slave labor camps and the other institutions provided to kill the spirit of Stalin's subjects.

Marchenko's book is important because it is the first detailed, unvarnished account of the Soviet penal system under

Stalin's successors. His testimony makes it clear that the change is mainly quantitative, not qualitative. It is believed that in the peak years immediately after World War II, as many as 20 million people in the U.S.S.R. were condemned to forced labor or permanent exile in remote and inhospitable parts of the country. Whole peoples, such as the Crimean Tatars, were subjected to this treatment.

It is clear from Marchenko's book, which was written after his release from prison and was smuggled out of Russia, that the scale of the prison camps is much smaller today. But Marchenko claims that the camps for political prisoners are as terrible as they were under Stalin. He has written, "It is essential that everybody should know about this — both those who want to know the truth . . . and those who do not wish to know it . . . I would like this testimony of mine about Soviet camps and prisons for political prisoners to become known to the humanitarians and progressive people of other countries, to those who speak up in defense of political prisoners in Greece, Portugal, South Africa and Spain . . ."

Marchenko disclaims any

literary talent. He did not intend "My Testimony" to be a work of art. He claims only to have observed and memorized what transpired during his six years of imprisonment. "There is not," he says, "a single invented personage nor a single invented incident" in the book. The reader who is new to books of this type will find much that is almost beyond belief. Marchenko spares no details, and it is not surprising that one who has been so brutalized should be brutally frank in his descriptions and his language.

He discusses in some detail self-mutilation by the prisoners. In most cases this is done out of sheer desperation. The prisoner hopes to get some respite from the daily torture of his life. He may swallow assorted objects, slit open his stomach or put powdered glass in his eyes. In other cases the mutilation is an act of defiance. This was frequently done by tattooing anti-communist expressions on the face or other parts of the body. Marchenko says the most common of these was "Khrushchev's slave" or "Slave of the CPSU" (communist party) tattooed in big letters across the forehead. The authorities frequently had the

offending tattoos removed by crude operations. Marchenko tells of one prisoner who had had three such operations on his forehead. His skin was so tightly stretched that he couldn't close his eyes. He was nicknamed "the Stare."

The most incredible thing about Marchenko's book is that it should have been written. After one has read what the author endured in his six years in prison one would have imagined that he would have emerged completely broken in spirit and determined to avoid being sent back at all costs. Marchenko knew what the penalty would be for daring to expose to public view the inhumanity of the Soviet penal system. He expected to be arrested, and he challenged the authorities to try him publicly if they accused him of slander. He pointed out that if they tried him in secret they would only be confirming the truth of what he had written.

The authorities got around this dilemma by arresting him on a trumped up technicality and sentencing him to a year in prison. Before this sentence expired he was again tried, presumably because his book was published abroad, and sentenced to an additional three years.

"My Testimony" deserves to be read, not only because it is a gripping expose of a great evil, but because we cannot ignore a human being with as much courage and dedication to decency as Anatoly Marchenko.